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The Americas

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Violence in Honduras

The eye of the storm

Timid steps to tame the world's most violent country

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TEGUCIGALPA



LAST year Hondurans were about 80 times more likely than Western Europeans to be murdered. For men in their 20s, the odds were four times worse again. Poverty and a history of military rule meant that Honduras was never especially safe. But the murder rate has nearly doubled in the past five years. Barring war zones, this makes Honduras by most reckonings the most violent country in the world.

The cocaine trade, which over the past two decades was squeezed first out of the Caribbean and then from Mexico, bears much of the blame. "We are between those who consume drugs and those who produce them. Logically, we are a corridor of traffic," says Pompeyo Bonilla Reyes, Honduras's security minister. In 2000 Honduras and the six other small Central American countries, all told, seized less cocaine than Mexico. By last year they captured 12 times more than their northern neighbour.

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Mexican traffickers use Honduras's wild Mosquito Coast as a landing point for drug deliveries, a trend that intensified when police and troops were called to the capital following a coup in 2009. Violence has risen partly because gangs, such as Mexico's Zetas, have diversified into more disruptive criminal businesses. Antonio Mazzitelli, of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, says the Zetas offer local gangs arms, training and the use of their feared brand, in return for a cut of the revenues from extortion or people-trafficking, and safe passage for cocaine. Gang bosses remain at arm's length: as of last October, Honduran jails held only one Mexican.

Honduras's police have proven unequal to the threat posed by these emboldened criminal franchises. Fewer than half of the murders last year have even a provisional official explanation, and nine out of ten go unpunished. According to Julieta Castellanos, the rector of the National Autonomous University, that is because "in place of combating crime [the police] have involved themselves in it. There is corruption from the highest levels to the people on the street." Ms Castellanos became an advocate for reform when police killed her son last year. At first, officers accused him of carrying drugs. But the university launched its own investigation, which found evidence that the policemen had murdered him in cold blood. Such episodes show that Honduras is "on the way to becoming a failed state", says Ramón Custodio López, the country's human-rights ombudsman.

In November the government deployed troops to patrol the most dangerous cities. An independent body now handles complaints against the police, and the force is being vetted. But in six months only 150 of the 11,000 officers have been purged

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reputation. He was accused of a vigilante murder in 2002, but later acquitted after going on the run for several months.

Last year Central America's rising drug violence finally caught international attention. At a summit in June 2011 with foreign leaders and donors, the regional presidents approved a joint security plan. Honduran police are now being advised by officers from Colombia, Chile and Nicaragua. Central American governments are working together in some security operations. So are prosecutors. Porfirio Lobo, Honduras's president, wants the UN to set up an independent agency to fight impunity, similar to Guatemala's CICIG. But the UN has agreed only to train Honduran prosecutors: it says this will strengthen, rather than risk undermining, local institutions. It is also much cheaper.

The United States, too, has failed to match increased concern with more than a few million dollars in extra security aid. But American armed forces have established three anti-drug bases in Honduras. In a joint raid last month, Honduran police and agents from America's Drug Enforcement Administration seized about half a tonne of cocaine on the Mosquito Coast, but also killed four people whom locals say had nothing to do with the drug transfer. Two were pregnant women, machine-gunned in their canoe.

None of these efforts has done much to stop the violence. The Honduran Congress is only now considering tighter control of guns—used in 85% of murders—by cutting the legal limit of five firearms per person. The first quarter of this year saw 1,709 killings. Although that is 1% fewer than during the same period in 2011, it is probably still enough to keep Honduras at the top of the world's murder table for another year.

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